

# Prison 'escape' artist

• People

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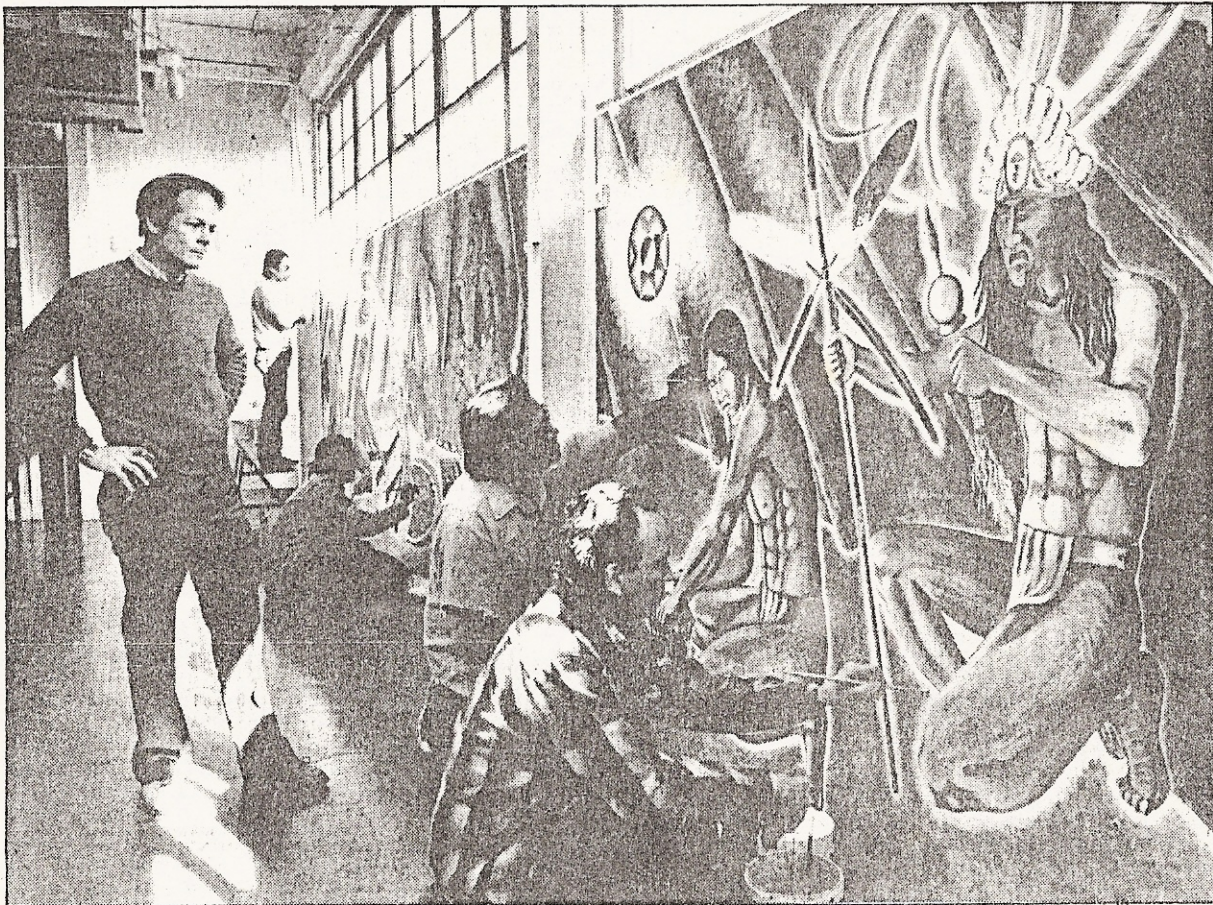
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Californian Photo

Aranda (right) helps inmate Robert Figueroa put final touches on mural as Jack Bowers watches.

# Artist helps inmates escape from prison life

By MIKE WENNERGREN  
Californian Staff Writer

SOLEDAD — Guillermo Aranda is an escape artist. In the past 10 months, he has used art to help 17 men escape from Soledad Prison.

Aranda, an accomplished mural painter who lives in Watsonville, supervised a group of inmates who painted a mural in the north facility at Soledad Prison.

For some of those men, Aranda said, working on the mural was their only escape from the hassles and drudgery of prison life.

"This was about the only thing they looked forward to during the week," Aranda said. "It's a completely different atmosphere — They can leave all their tensions out in the yard."

Jack Bowers, artist facilitator at the prison, said there is a lot of pent-up energy in prison.

Sometimes, Bowers said, it erupts in violence — usually

along racial or ethnic lines.

But, he said, having artists like Aranda work with a racially and ethnically mixed group of inmates eases tension and discourages strife.

"One of the places that (racial strife) gets left out the door is in the art program," Bowers said.

Bowers said, however, that not just any artist can come into the prison and work with inmates.

"You have to adjust to working in an environment like this, and Guillermo really adjusted," he said.

Aranda said all he asked of the inmates was that they treat him and each other with respect.

"I've never asked any one of them what they're in here for," he said. "I want to know what they are right now — not what they were before."

But even so, Aranda said he had trouble getting some of them to lighten up.

"I had to deal with some guys

who, when they first came in, you could not get a smile out of them," he said. "But after a month or two, they relaxed. They knew no one was going to hassle them."

For the subject of the mural, Aranda chose to depict a water blessing ritual of the Native American Church. He said the mural not only taught the inmates about art but it also taught them about another culture.

Aranda, who once worked on a mural for 13 years, said working 10 months on the mural at Soledad also taught the inmates another valuable lesson: patience.

Aranda had to exercise some patience himself.

The state Department of Corrections and the California Arts Council hired him for only six months. But Aranda needed 10 months to complete the mural, so he donated four more months of his own time.

"I really feel a sense of accomplishment," he said. "Not only

because we got the mural done, but because because I saw these guys work together."

The inmates who worked on the mural said they also got something out of it.

"I could come in here angry at the world and everything would just dissolve," said Gale Gilmore of Oklahoma. "It helped the time go by quickly, and I dealt with different people from all backgrounds."

One of those different people, a Southern Californian named Joseph Nichols who also goes by the Muslim name Yusef, agreed.

"A lot of brothers here, we feel a lot better around each other," Yusef said. "We don't have a lot of tension like other penitentiaries, and I think this art program has a lot to do with it. Without it, no one really has much to do. This is a way people can let out the pressure. It puts me in another world. It's sort of like being out on the streets."